DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 283 230 CS 505 639

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TITLE Creating Community-Based Video Productions.
PUB DATE May 87
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (78th, Syracuse, NY, May 18-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cable Television; *Community Relations; *Cooperative Education; Course Content; Education Work Relationship; Higher Education; *Production Techniques; *Television; Television Curriculum; Video Equipment; Videotape Recordings; *Work Experience Programs

ABSTRACT

In the interest of offering universities new avenues for teaching students methods of video production, this paper presents a number of ideas for allowing students to practice their production skills out in the community. Following an introduction, the paper lists six types of community based productions suitable for students: (1) performance feedback record keeping, (2) commercials and public service announcements, (3) soundbites for local news/public affairs, (4) instructional programs (for other university professors or employees of local businesses), (5) documentaries, and (6) entertainment films. The paper notes that students can also enter projects in contests, and then lists several problems with community-based productions, including time restraints, equipment, and abuse of free labor by the community. A sample course outline concludes the paper, which suggests types of projects suitable for one or two semesters, and textbooks. Notes and two references are appended. (JC)

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CREATING COMMUNITY-BASED VIDEO PRODUCTIONS

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In teaching college-level video production courses a combination of theory and practice is necessary. In some courses, the practice consists of productions in the college television studio. Other courses focus on field work using portable video equipment. However, whether in the studio or in the field, productions are often based on student scripts of little consequence that will soon be forgotten.

One way to add excitement to video production courses and make the productions more meaningful is to have students produce real programs or segments of programs for people on and off campus. There are many benefits to students involved in such a practice, including practical experience that can be reflected on resumes and in audition tapes, the instillment of professionalism in students dealing with "clients," and the receipt of a variety of feedback on student work. Non-pedagogical benefits include good public relations for the department that houses video production courses, possible donations from community participants, and service to the university and community.

Internships have traditionally been the link between classroom and professional experience. While unions at large television stations and production houses often preclude students from getting "hands-on" experience, there are internships available at many cable companies and public broadcasting stations which allow interns to do actual

production work (Dreibelbis, 1986). However, not all students have a chance to participate in internships where they are allowed to participate in production. Some communities may not have stations which take interns. Furthermore, some students may not have a sufficient overall grade point average to participate in internships or, if the internships are competitive, some may be denied the experience in deference to students with better grades. Without outside experience in production students can be at a real disadvantage when they apply for jobs. Not only will they be competing against people who have had experience, but they may also lack the sense of professionalism which develops while working on projects for people outside the classroom.

Simulations are a traditional practice in production courses where students produce their own programs, but there is evidence that instructors are going beyond the classroom to give their students more "real world" experience to integrate with their classroom theory and practice.[1] Some colleges are taking advantage of cable access channels in their communities as an avenue of exposure for student-produced programming.[2] Furthermore, video production courses are not the only radio/television-oriented courses which can benefit from experience outside the classroom. Students in a Sales and Management class at Pittsburg State University sell, write, and produce radio commercials for one broadcast day on a local AM station (Zaharopoulos, 1986).

While simulations and internships are still important aspects of learning video production, integrating course work with production work for people outside the classroom can also be important learning experiences for students. The rest of this paper will focus on possible community-based production projects, problems/guidelines necessary in creating programs or program segments as part of regular video production course work, and a sample course outline.

COMMUNITY-BASED PRODUCTIONS

The kinds of community-based productions which can be used as projects for video production courses are divided into six categories for convenience of discussion. The projects are discussed in order of complexity, starting with the least complex.

Performance feedback/Record keeping

Production teachers are frequently asked by colleagues and the administration to supply students and equipment for the videotaping of performance courses and on-campus events. The recording of plays, musical events and sports can present a real challenge and learning experience for video production students. Plays and musical events are not lit with television cameras in mind; video students not only learn first-hand the base light requirements of their cameras, but they also learn to express their lighting requirements to stage hands and lighting directors where they are recording. In addition, students also learn how to plug into auditorium and theatre sound systems or where to

place microphones for the best sound pick-up. When doing such on-location work, students also learn the importance of scouting the location first--what kind of lighting is available, where is the best location for the camera(s), what kind of connectors will be needed to plug into the sound system, where an a/c adapter can be plugged in and how much extension cable will be necessary, and so on.

Perhaps the most challenging recording is the live coverage of sports events, particularly if it is being done for a campus station or local cable access channel. If a portable switcher is available for multiple cameras, directing a sports show can really teach the importance of keeping up with the action and watching monitors. However, sometimes sports events are recorded for use of the coach and players only. If this is the case, students can compile a highlights tape at the end of the season, perhaps even editing to music.

The simple recording of most classroom performances and guest lecturerers, however, are not recommended for course work. Requests can become overwhelming and there is little to be learned when subjects just stand or sit in front of a camera. Instructors or performance students can easily be trained to record such events themselves, particularly in courses such as public speaking or oral interpretation where there is little call for change in camera shots and half-inch equipment can be set up in the classroom. However, recording group discussion courses, because they can be

directed like a talk show, could be a good studio experience, whether for beginning production students or advanced.

There are also many off-campus recording opportunities available in the area of performance feedback and record keeping. Local or transient performers and directors may want a record of their work. Real estate agencies may want videotapes of houses and properties to show clients. Family-related events such as weddings, birthdays and graduations, could also be recorded.

Commercials and Public Service Announcements

Local businesses and non-profit organizations may be approached, particularly those which do not yet use a local television or cable station for their messages. Perhaps an arrangement could be made with a local television station or cable channel, similar to the arrangement at Pittsburg State University with an AM radio station, where commercial time would be donated and money from the businesses would go towards new production equipment. The creation of public service announcements for non-profit organizations could also be a public service for students, particularly if they were aired on a campus television station.

Soundbites for Local News/Public Affairs

Many stations do not have enough portable video equipment to cover everything they would like, nor are they always aware of all newsworthy events. Video production students could become "stringers" for local video news

outlets, covering campus news and other local stories. In addition, locally produced magazine shows may occasionally need extra footage or fully produced feature stories. While soundbites are more often produced with portable video equipment and require editing, interviews of newsworthy people also could be conducted in a studio.

Instructional Programs

It is easy enough to contact instructors on-campus to gauge their desire for the creation of educational programs or segments. Many colleges have restricted or deleted their audio/visual services, so such a service could fulfill a real need on campus. Local businesses could also be contacted for possible employee-training tapes.

Documentaries

Most communities are rich in history or contain groups or institutions which would make interesting informational or investigative programs. Students might also be interested in making a "campus yearbook." Although not typically defined as a documentary because its purposes are different, a campus yearbook could be a document of campus life which could even be duplicated and sold for those who want visual reminders of their college years.

Entertainment

Short entertainment features, such as those used as "fillers" on Home Box Office between feature programs, could be produced in the studio or on location with portable equipment. Longer entertainment programs--drama, comedy,

variety--could also be produced, perhaps in conjunction with on-campus writing courses or local writers off-campus.

Contests

Although this category encompasses all the above categories, contests deserve special mention. Students need to become aware of what others are doing and they need to understand that producing programs is a competitive business; entering contests can help students become more aware of both. Knowing that a project will be competing with others can also be an inspiration to students to try harder and strive for professionalism. There are many contests students can enter, including the Dore Schary awards on programs about human relations and the Speech Communication Association's contest on public service announcements about communication.

PROBLEMS WITH COMMUNITY-BASED VIDEO

Time

In courses which last only from ten to fifteen weeks, it would be difficult to complete some of the suggested projects. Therefore, it is important to choose projects by their feasibility within a certain time frame. While beginning video classes might not do outside projects until the latter part of the semester, advanced video students could begin them much earlier. Some course work could span more than one semester if courses were required to be taken consecutively. Projects could also be finished by future classes, as independent studies, or as extra credit.

Equipment

Not all colleges use professional 3/4 inch or 1 inch video equipment, and even those that do may be using older equipment which is not producing the quality signal they would like. One solution would be producing videos for groups which have their own equipment or who would be willing to rent the appropriate equipment. If there is a local cable franchise which has a studio, perhaps their facilities could be used, particularly if local origination and access are part of their franchise agreement. Schools which use half inch equipment may not be able to convince local television stations to accept their programs, but half inch equipment is certainly acceptable for producing instructional, industrial and cable access programming.

Quality of Student Work

Students should not work on outside projects until they have demonstrated an acceptable level of competence. Any outside work will require professional guidance by the instructor, acting as executive producer, but the amount of guidance can be adjusted by demonstration of individual student ability. Another option is to offer outside projects to only the better students, allowing them to substitute regular class activities for equivalent community-based work. Students can also be used for professional productions by the instructor as regular course work, extra credit, or just for the experience. As more colleges accept productions as publications, more production instructors may be tempted

to produce programs. Regardless of the purpose of the production, it must be cautioned that audiences may not take into consideration the fact that students worked on a program, and will often judge by standards used for more expensive, professionally produced programs. Thus, the emphasis on quality and professionalism is an important consideration. While some student-produced productions would be acceptable for on-campus television or cable access channels, they may not be appropriate for other means of distribution and exhibition.

Coordinating Students

While students are certain to have diverse time schedules, not all students have to be available at the same time for outside productions. Some can be responsible for activities such as editing or scriptwriting, activities which are more flexible than shooting schedules. Students can coordinate their production assignments and meeting times among themselves. Having the class divide into small production crews of their choice makes coordinating schedules easier.

Community Cooperation

Usually people are eager to help students, particularly when that help can also result in free publicity for themselves. While businesses which already have established relationships for the production of commercials may be reluctant to use students, perhaps they can be persuaded by the free exposure to a new market via a campus station. More

ambitious projects may require official permission from authorities, sometimes delaying projects to the point where they must be done another semester (e.g. state permission for a prison documentary). However, non-profit, non-governmental agencies are usually happy to cooperate with students, as are many private citizens. The campus community, including the administration, is usually pleased with the good publicity and public relations which results from community-based productions.

Abuse of Free Labor

As with internships, there is the possibility that the free use of students for work will be abused. The primary criterion in deciding on projects should be whether it will be a legitimate learning experience according to the course objectives. The first time students do a project for a community member, it is a learning experience; perhaps the second time the same students do something for the same group, it is a job and they should get paid. We do not want our students taking away jobs from our graduates.

SAMPLE COURSE OUTLINE

Objectives

The main objective in a course of community-based advanced video production is for students to learn advanced studio and field production by creating programs and program segments which will be used outside the class. Students will learn how to use portable video equipment and how to edit videotape. Since students will be producing programs for

contests and community people, there will also be an emphasis on professionalism, including client relations, location permission, and release forms. Lecture material will emphasize not only aesthetics, but also more technical knowledge since technicians are not always available for field productions.

Textbook

A good textbook with the emphasis on field production is Small Format Television Production by Ronald Compesi and Ronald Sherriffs. There are also several magazines which have technical articles for supplemental reading, including Broadcasting, Video Systems, and International Television.

Supplies

Students should supply their own videotape. For 3/4 inch productions, 20 minute minicassettes and 60 minute cassettes on which to edit the program are required. While each student would be required to purchase a 20 minute cassette, 60 minute tapes could be shared by production teams. Broadcast quality tapes are recommended. For half inch systems, one or two high grade quality tapes should be purchased.

Tests

A midterm and final examination should be given, based on textbook and lecture material. Students need to integrate book work with field work, realizing there is a need for both.

Productions

To refresh student skills and to get them working together as a team, an initial studio exercise is helpful. The instructor can supply the script, perhaps a short dramatic scene, and students can divide into two production ccteams. Directing can be emphasized and shooting in the studio with two or three cameras can be compared to doing the same scene with one camera. The next exercise can introduce students to field production work--perhaps a two or three minute cinema verite style segment of campus life. After the initial one or two productions, students should then be ready to produce community-based programming. A good first assignment because it is short could be to produce a thirty second public service announcement about communication for the annual Speech Communication Association contest. The next assignment could be a magazine show for campus television or a local cable access channel. The third graded assignment could be a music video of original music from a local band or it could even be a "corporate" music video, containing employee information set to music. If there is time, a short dramatic piece of original material would be a good final assignment and possibly contest material.

For all graded assignments, production notebooks should be required. These notebooks would include a one or two column script, storyboard, floor plan and lighting plots, prop lists and credits.

Flexibility is important when working with equipment and community people. Sometimes equipment breaks down and sometimes opportunities arise or disappear without warning. In addition, all students may not have the skills necessary for working on some community projects. Therefore, the instructor may want to give students options on required assignments.

Grading

Grading of productions should be based on technical quality of the videotaped program, content, and pre-production planning as evidenced by the production notebook. Instructors may also consider evaluations by community members involved in the projects.

CONCLUSION

While in-class simulations and internships are still available for most production students, the inclusion of community-based video in production courses can enrich their learning experience. In some cases, it may be the only professional experience students have before they seek video production jobs. While students are learning practical skills and developing professional attitudes, they are also improving resumes and establishing good community relations. From relatively simple recording of performances to the more complicated production of documentaries and entertainment programming, programs can be produced by students which satisfy both their educational needs and the needs of the community. The potential problems, such as quality of

equipment and student work, can be overcome when instructor, students and community people work together.

NOTES

[1]For example, at the University of Georgia production professionals have donated to students thousands of dollars of time and facilities for the television adaptation of a short story to be aired on local television. Also see Janis L. Taylor, "Crossing Boundaries Between Academia and the Television Industry," Feedback (Winter 1987): 3-6+.

[2]A survey of cable access channel use in teaching video production on the college/university level is currently being conducted at Corpus Christi State University.

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